# Duty and Honor

**Meriko**

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# Summary

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## Description:

Freya gets closure with Sir Fratley. This takes place before the final FMV sequence. Slightly AU (Cleyra still standing). Status: Complete.

# 1. Duty and Honor

**Duty and Honor**

A lone Dragoon Knight, dressed in a unique, blood-red uniform of her own design, walked slowly through Cleyra’s streets, looking to the left and to the right as if a visitor and seeing the place for the first time, instead of for the thousandth. Commonplace things such as a flower box in a window or a merrily turning watermill would capture the Knight’s attention for several minutes, as though a wonder to be marveled over. Though unarmed, still the uniform was recognizable — indeed, it was visible from a hundred feet away — and such was Lady Freya’s awesome reputation and preoccupied look that all who passed her did so with only a respectful nod.

Freya had returned to Burmecia almost immediately after parting ways with Zidane nearly three years ago. She had returned to her birthplace, paid homage to the King, and fallen into an unceasing effort to help heal the wounds of her country. However, she had spent almost all of the time in the actual kingseat, helping to rebuild what

had once been a mighty fortress city. The King had continued to rule from the sanctuary of Cleyra's branches, and although Freya had been called into his presence several times each year, this was the first time she'd felt that she had the leisure to actually walk around and reacquaint herself with the lofty city.

The material damages wrought by the black mage attacks had been long repaired, as they had been no more than surface scratches such as broken windows, scorched walls, and a burnt watermill or two. And even the heartbreaking gaps in the population had been filled somewhat, and children once again ran laughing up and down the paved paths. Flowers bloomed bright in mossy cushions amongst the rocks, and water flowed clear and pure down the center of Cleyra's busy heart. The houses were whitewashed once more, and all of the windows glittered with neat panes of glass. Cracked cobblestones had been replaced, crumbling walls had been mended, and broken hearts had healed in the years since the threat of Gaia's forced repopulation with the souls of Terra's dead.

The kingseat of Burmecia, much larger and more devastatingly damaged, would take much longer to rebuild. Not just scorch marks along houses, but

entire buildings laid waste. Not a broken branch or two, necessitating a restructuring of Cleyra's winding streets, but massive monuments and walls, the final product of years of quarrying and stonemasonry, pulled to the ground and destroyed. The greater part of Burmecia's people had spent well over two years repairing and replacing and rebuilding, but it would take at least that long and again to complete the work.

Freya's days were filled with thoughts and actions and words all revolving around the kingdom which she served, both as a Knight in the Dragoon Guards, and simply, nobly, rightly, as a citizen. At night, she wrote letters to the strange company of friends she had gathered about her during the long fight to keep their entire world safe, the most paper and ink-consuming being the long missives that she exchanged with the Queen of Alexandria, full of mutual encouragement and empathy, and always ending with simple post scripts to and from the faithful Steiner. Shorter letters were exchanged with the rest, with small parcels of nuts and other gifts being regularly dispatched at first to Mandain Sari and more recently Lindblum, where they were eagerly received by Eiko and her horde of little friends. And she prayed for Zidane.

Uplifting yet wearying work, to the body, mind, and heart, but Freya had labored faithfully. Now in Cleyra, with all seemingly as it had been before, the dedicated Dragoon was able to rest a while, and gather strength from the peace and serenity she found there.

Not everything was the same, however. The holy sandstorm that had so long protected Cleyra was conspicuously absent, and though the Wind Harp's strings had been mended, no jewel glittered above it to lend magic to the music.

And Sir Fratley's memory was still missing.

He had returned to Burmecia one spring morning just as abruptly as he'd departed after the black mage attack. Again, Freya had been one of the first to speak to him, and the conversation had been painfully abrupt. After finding that the King was still at Cleyra, Sir Fratley had given her a perfunctory bow, turned, and left. Once more, she'd had to watch him walk out of Burmecia. She had thought bitterly to herself that she ought to be getting used to it by now.

Since then, he had been reinstated into the Dragoon Guards, and served as part of the King's personal guard. The beaten and warped brown hat

and matching travel-worn garments were exchanged for his old uniform, and it was seen and remarked upon that even before the dust had been polished off, it was apparent that the years away and the loss of his memory had not impaired Sir Fratley's self control, formality, and utter cool.

Well over a decade ago, when Freya had entered her novitiate, Sir Fratley had taken on the role of her mentor. Only a few years older than she, still his manner, strength, and abilities with the lance had advanced him through the Dragoon Guards to the point where he was already one of the senior and most respected members. There had only been one moment, when she had been invested with her own lance and uniform with a small silver medal that designated her as Sir Fratley's charge pinned to her cloak, and she had looked up to see Sir Fratley's tall, lean form striding towards her, that she'd quailed before his suddenly intimidating presence, swelled in her mind by rumor and reputation.

But somehow, she'd found the reality of him anything but frightening. He had been stern, demanding, and ruthlessly upright in his morals and judgment, but Freya had seen — although not many others had — that there was affection and humor to be found within him as well. Many Novices were

quite stripped of their identities, and had to learn to discern their own mentor's voice among the many who cried out, "Novice!" Sir Fratley took this one step further, and added mild insults to the mix, which, while making it easier for Freya to know when he called her, also added to her indignity. When a voice was heard to call, 'You there, young Novice!' or "Attend me, little runt of a Burmecian!" everyone knew that it was Freya who was being summoned.

She hadn't been able to complain, for upon entering her novitiate, Freya had truly been the smallest, weakest… *runtiest* Burmecian ever to enter the ranks of Dragoon hopefuls. Having spent most of her youth as an Acolyte in the Holy Order, she had none of the strength of the other Novices, who were all seasoned soldiers. But three and a half years of training had yielded not only a great deal of knowledge and skills gained, but also two handspans of height, and a whole cornerstone of muscle. It was in the last six months of her training that Fratley had finally seemed to notice her outrageous growth, and began replacing "runt" with 'Freya,' for some reason dropping her title of Novice entirely out of his vocabulary. Her friends had not seen it as much improvement, for her mentor had still added words

like “foolish” before her name, but Freya had beamed for an entire month’s time over the change.

Her training had deviated from the normal course of a novitiate towards the end, as Sir Fratley had actually taken her along on various journeys and tasks, relying upon her and leaving her free to her own judgment and abilities as if she were truly his comrade instead of trainee. It had been on these trips that he’d first and only called her by name alone, but that astounding change she had kept to herself.

A few months later, she had entered the Dragoon Guards dressed in a bright red cloak of her own making, and discovered something else that had changed within her during the previous four years.

*“Such a bold color, now.”*

*Freya turned around at the voice, and broke into a wide smile, unable in her excitement to conduct herself with anything remotely resembling the cool self-control that was becoming a Knight. “Sir Fratley!” she cried happily, and then picked self-consciously at her uniform. “Is it overmuch?” she asked uneasily.*

*The crimson-clad Dragoon straightened up considerably then, as Sir Fratley narrowed his eyes*

*and looked her over from head to toe with a critical air. Finally, her former mentor shook his head, and with one of his rare smiles, said, "It suits you, Lady Knight."*

*Freya stared in surprise as he took off his hat and made her a low bow, the first such formal gesture she'd ever received, right after the first time anyone had ever addressed her as Lady. She bowed in return, but then straightened up with a jerk when Fratley commented offhand, "You are a fellow Dragoon now, and deserving of respect as such. I suppose I shall have to leave off calling you Freya from now on."*

*"No!" she blurted immediately, and then clapped her mouth shut and blushed.*

*But Sir Fratley simply nodded, ignoring her abrupt outburst and replying, "As you wish," before bowing to her once more and walking off.*

Oh, how young she had been! To not realize she was so in love with her mentor until the moment chance had revealed it to her, in the form of a sudden, wild horror at the thought of never hearing him speak her name again. She'd spent several sleepless nights, afraid that Sir Fratley might have made this astonishing discovery at the same time, or

even worse, had known all long. But her worries dissippated with time, for his manner had remained unchanged toward her, and she had finally convinced herself that her fears were groundless.

They spoke when chance provided the opportunity, and he called her Freya when they were alone, and added “Lady” when they were not. Newly ordained Dragoons were often paired up with their former mentors for journeys, for they were already at ease with the other and had also often worked out the minute difficulties and differences that arose when two people had to rely upon each other for their lives, and also get along over the evening campfire, and so Freya found herself traveling much at Sir Fratley’s side. That time had been one of great joy and discovery, both in her career and her heart, for she’d found that the mocking affection she’d seen in her mentor had become a true friendship between comrades, and she dared to hope that it might one day become even more. That nearly everyone else saw only Sir Fratley’s cold, stern demeanor, and considered him almost frightfully formal and oft times heartless, was a sort of inside joke between he and Freya, and they had made much fun of it on occassion.

Freya laughed softly to herself at some of the memories that crowded upon her, and then shut her eyes tight to keep the tears from escaping.

So much had changed.

Chance sometimes brought her into Fratley's presence, but there were no more long talks or confiding smiles. In fact, there was not even any recognition in his eyes. Her first battle, their campfire talks, the red cloak, her first bow… it was all gone. He didn't remember her.

The Knight stopped her wanderings and looked about her. It had been a restful walk, with only a mild breeze keeping her company, and she had been heartened to see how wonderfully restored Cleyra was. But somehow, the enchantment of this treetop city was lost to her. She had been encouraged to stay on at Cleyra, and to take again her particular post in the Dragoon Guards, but she had respectfully declined after a moment's thought. She could better serve her King and kingdom by continuing on in the capital, rather than by staying on to protect and advise the King when there were already so many Dragoon Guards stationed at Cleyra, and advice was as readily given through letters and short visits.

Standing alone near the spring that fed the city, Freya closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, as if to try and draw in the peace that she felt in the very air around her, as a renewing potion to gird her for another three and more years of labor for love and loyalty's sake. There was nothing for her here, and so she would return to the Burmecian capital, that she might be useful, even if she were not strictly necessary. Far better to lose the days and months and years in simple but needful work, than to stay here in Cleyra, where her services to the king would yet leave her many long hours in which to think too many thoughts, and none close enough to share them with.

Walking along the pathway toward the stairways that would lead to the outer gates, Freya caught sight of a familiar figure standing within a small, circular pavillion set on the very edge of one of Cleyra's branches. The man was facing out toward the desert, into the sea breezes that made their laborious journey inland to cool Cleyra, and she could not see his face, but she recognized him all the same. Long, delicately curved ears, shoulder-length hair cut rather haphazardly that seemed elegant for all its uncaring edges, broad shoulders, and above all, that ramrod straight posture and presence that made

everyone else seem slouched and slovenly. Now reinstated in the Dragoon Guards which served closest to the King, his drab traveling attire had been replaced with his deep blue uniform of old, but Freya would have recognized him even had he been wearing a Priest's robes. Her feet swerved automatically from the path, bringing her into the cool shadows of the balcony where Sir Fratley was standing.

Catching sight of her fluttering red cloak, he turned, met her eyes, and gave her a simple bow of greeting. Freya returned it, her heart aching all the while because of the absolute blankness in his eyes. She was no more to him than the stonework of the balcony, or the carpeting in the sanctuary. Part of Cleyra, part of Burmecia, but nothing more.

Freya walked over to the railing of the balcony as if she merely wanted to contemplate the scenery, but her eyes were blind to the glittering stretch of desert before her, and the vast ocean beyond. It had been so easy to speak before, but now she was hard put to even think of a single word to say. Would "hello" be too friendly? But surely "Greetings, Sir Knight," would be stifled and stiff. Should she have smiled at him as well as bowed? But he never smiled back, at least, not with his eyes as well as his mouth.

He doesn’t see me, Freya thought sadly.

Then, as if the rounded balcony were too cramped for two people to stand in it at once, or perhaps simply thinking to give her privacy, Fratley nodded to her and then began to move towards the paved pathway curving near the pavillion. Unwilling to have him walk away from her yet again, Freya called to him, hoping to start some sort of converstaion. “Does being back in Burmecia, and here in the arms of Cleyra, ease you at all?” she asked, as he walked past her.

He stopped, turned, and gave her his attention, as politeness dictated that he should, despite her abrupt question. “What do you mean?” he asked in turn.

“You have suffered greatly, Sir Fratley, and sacrificed much,” Freya said, expanding on her question. “You have lost all of your memories, and it was not even on the King’s orders that you set out those years ago.”

“It is my honor and duty to serve the King,” Fratley replied automatically, and a bit coldly, as if to remonstrate her for making such foolish statements, and herself a Dragoon. To face danger, fear, and death for King and kingdom… it was an honor and their duty. All Dragoons responded thus,

as a matter of fact, but it held some hint of bitterness for Freya.

“You spoke to me of honor and duty when you left Burmecia, too,” Freya reminisced. “You were brave and unselfish and I was proud of you in the midst of my pain. And that was my own form of bravery and sacrifice as well, I suppose.”

Fratley tilted his head at her, watching her with dark brown eyes that seemed both warm and cold by turns. The formality, the polite curiosity, and the absence of any recognition at all chilled Freya to the marrow.

She looked back at him for a while, and in the absence of any further speech from her, Fratley asked, “In what form did honor and duty call you to be brave and sacrificial, Lady?”

Lady. She smiled sadly to herself over the impersonal address, and then answered him in a much more subdued tone. Her voice was more suitable for drawing room confidences rather than a polite conversation in the courtyard between two knights, but who was there to witness the slight social oddity? No one but her love, who remembered her not at all.

“It was my honor to be the one whom you chose to see you off,” Freya began explaining. “And it was my duty to watch you out of the gates, and to pray for your success and safety, and to help fill the void you left behind in the Dragoon Guards. And I was brave, because I stood my ground firmly as you left, and did not allow myself to weep until your back was turned. And I sacrificed my personal concerns before the altar of duty, and did not ask you to stay, nor to take me with you, nor even yet to question whether the parting was as painful to you as it was to me.”

Her voice tightened with remembered pain and renewed bitterness despite herself as she continued. “But even then I had the hope that you would return to Burmecia. And so I walked to the gates with you, watched you off with acquiescence for your eyes and tears for your back, and prayed that you would come back safely and soon, that I might gather up the courage to speak to you of something I’d long kept hidden. And now my prayers have been answered, for you are here, and safe, and I take comfort in neither my bravery nor my sacrifice, for I wish I had not let you go.”

She clipped off her words then, and fell back into silence, hearing her voice trembling and weak and

unwilling to let him listen to her voice break entirely into tears. She had wept before, but never in his presence, and she did not intend to do so now, however great her anguish. Her soul relived the heart-rending resolution to let him go freely, without either her presence or her heart burdening him on this God-given mission, and Freya trembled with the pain, so suddenly fresh again after all these years. To burn with the holy flame of self sacrifice, only to be rewarded with news of his death. Years of waiting and searching and finding nothing… years in which her hope and the bitterness against Fate had both died down into vague dreams and dull aches. And then to catch sight of him, to hear his voice, only to find that she was nothing to his altered mind… not even a faint memory.

Sir Fratley's appearance was unaltered, if you discounted the additional veneer of disinterest in his eyes. A Dragoon Knight, with his training and abilities intact, despite the massive memory loss. Though his mind had been tampered with, his soul had remained intact, and he was still possessed of a great sense of honor and strength, duty to King and kingdom, and loyalty to the people he had sworn to protect. Puck, the heir to the throne, with his trademark audaciousness and stubborness, and

armed further with the title of Prince and the heritage of Burmecia, had found the memory-less Knight wandering aimlessly, and then had cajoled and commanded Sir Fratley back to Cleyra and managed to be the first to reclaim a place in the Dragoon's heart and mind. The King as well, the shining figurehead of all Burmecian Knights' glory, was now firmly fixed in the world that Fratley was slowly rebuilding for himself.

But Freya… Freya, who had run to him with all joy and love, who had responded to his blank stares and stiffly polite replies with shock and denial, and who had turned as abruptly away, bowing to fate and cursing it all the same… she was no more than one of the many Burmecians who made up the rest of the remaining population that Fratley simply knew to exist, and nothing more. The hope that had been allowed to slowly fade had risen up in one great burst and then been crushed just as quickly, leaving her with a fresh wound gaping over the old scar. Hope had been slaughtered, but the pain and regret remained, however, and was not assuaged, for Fratley did not remember her, nor attach any significance to her aside from the fact that she was a fellow soldier. She was not, in his mind, a key portion of his past, nor apparently important to his

future, and so he did not seek her out. And so Freya suffered, and suffered alone, for this was the last of the honor and bravery she wrapped around her heart… that none should pity her, nor see her so weak and wounded.

Freya stood quietly, facing the golden desert and the glittering ocean beyond it, and letting the wind dry the tears standing in her eyes, so certain that her companion would simply turn and leave her as he usually did when the conversation seemed at an end that she was startled to hear his voice once more.

“What?” she asked rather blankly, turning her head to look at him over her shoulder, her hands still braced on the stone balustraude.

He was still standing several feet away, at the entrance to the circular balcony where she’d first found him. “I asked,” he repeated, “if you could have done so.”

“If I could have done what, Sir Fratley?” Freya asked, discomfitted at being brought so abruptly out of her bitter musings. Now that she’d let out some of her tangled feelings, the crimson-clad Dragoon felt that it would have been better to have kept quiet after all, for the outpouring of her old hurts had not healed the wound any, nor would they endear this

familiar and strange knight to her. She who so longed for a word or look from this long-lost Dragoon now wished him well away from her, that she might continue her interrupted journey towards forgetting him.

“You spoke of regret that you let me go,” Fratley replied, and Freya winced inwardly, wishing anew that she’d not spoken so, and then widened her eyes in surprise when he continued, “Could you have prevented me?”

And what was one supposed to reply to that?

Be certain that I could have, Sir, if you’d loved me as I did you. I would have used your own heart as my only weapon, and it would have served me well. Love would have pinned you down to the cobblestones as surely as any dragon’s claws, and you would have been as capable of deserting me as you would have been of slaying the king. You would have surely taken me with you, for one doesn’t let their heart walk around without their protection.

For the first time in her life, Freya choose to mislead a fellow Dragoon rather than speak the immediate truth.

With a shallow smile, Freya replied, “I can not answer, Sir Fratley. Should that have been my selfish resolve, to prevent you from leaving… still I was unsure of my ability to do so.” Thinking of her uncertainty as to his own heart, she added lightly as a sort of joke, “I was not well armed at the time, in any case.”

Unfortunately, Sir Fratley was not in a joking frame of mind, and seemed to take her quite literally. He frowned after a moment’s thought, and then left her with a curt nod and the words, “If you would do me the honor of meeting me at the foot of Cleyra, Lady.” Perplexed, Freya watched him leave — again — and then, in a fit of rudeness born of impatience for this uncomfortable ordeal of hers to be over, considered ignoring his request and then avoiding this doppelganger of her love for the rest of her life.

She pondered this breach of courtesy for several tempting minutes, and then made her way down the sandy steps to the entrace of Cleyra, where she found Sir Fratley, dressed now in traveling attire and carrying two of his spears.

After receiving and returning his cursory bow, she asked, “Are you leaving again?” and was unable to keep the wistful tone out of her voice.

“I am,” came the steady reply. “His Majesty’s scholars speak of a jewel that might serve to bring music to the Wind Harp once more, and I have offered myself for the task of finding it and bringing it back, to aid in restoring Cleyra to its former strength.”

Freya clenched her jaw, and then bowed low. “I have the honor of watching you out of the gates once more, Sir Fratley,” she said, girding herself for this painful task.

“No, you do not.”

Freya looked up at him in surprise, straightening up just in time to catch the lance that he flung at her.

“Arm thyself,” Fratley said, using the more archaic pronoun to make it a formal challenge. “Duty and honor beckon me out of the gates once more, and thou shalt prevent me from leaving. If not, turn and leave, and speak no more of a past thou art not brave enough to overcome.” The challenge was delivered in a tone just slightly removed from insulting, and Freya, already quite emotional, swallowed the baiting whole.

“It was not cowardice that stayed my hand!” she shouted, gripping the lance tight. This… this was

too much. To lose him, not once, but twice, and then to have her courage and character challenged by the very one whom she had suffered so much over. Freya loved as fiercely as she could fight, but this misconstruing of herself was more than one could be expected to bear without retaliation. She had let him go freely for his sake alone, and now he implied that she'd lacked the courage to speak her wishes.

"I stand ready," Freya cried, in the traditional response to a challenge, and then she added in a low voice that was almost a growl, "And if I win, then I will have one demand of you."

Letting her informal speech pass for the moment, Fratley simply nodded and replied, "Agreed."

As soon as the word left his mouth, Freya charged at him, sweeping her weapon out in front of her while holding the lance near the end of the shaft in order to lengthen her reach. Fratley leapt easily out of the way, his own lance arcing down to try and knock hers out of her tenuous grasp, but his attacker had already rolled away, taking her spear with her. By some unspoken agreement, no magical skills were brought into play. Instead, both warriors relied solely upon their physical prowess with the Dragoon Guard's chosen weapon.

An errant breeze kicked up a mild sandstorm, nothing to compare with the divine whirlwind that had previously protected Cleyra, but enough to deceive the eye and make battle more difficult. The hazy sunlight that sifted through the massive branches of Cleyra and down into the whirling sand threw shadows that seemed to dance around, so that there was now an element of searching thrown into their fight.

Fratley lept away into the sand blowing around them, and while only a dozen feet away, became nearly invisible to Freya. They began an intricate game of hide and seek, and it was only through a series of errors in judgement that Freya found herself suddenly face to face with her challenger once more. Fratley had his head held high, scanning for her, and Freya had come upon him while crouched low, and so gained one moment's advantage, despite her surprise at actually finding Fratley instead of another sand-shadow. Without losing any momentum from her previous low leap, Freya rolled and struck her opponent square in the chest with both feet, sending him flying backwards. Falling back into a crouch, Freya gripped her spear tight and sprang into the air.

As he fell, Fratley brought his spear around so that when he landed on his back, the weapon was out in front of him, the butt of the lance planted firmly in the dirt by his arm. It was a simple defensive move that was taught to all who trained with the lance, and such common knowledge now that no one ever leapt upon a fallen Dragoon, for to do so would be to impale oneself for certain. But as the Dragoon Knight blinked his eyes open through the dust, the first thing he saw was Freya, silhouetted against a gritty canvas of sunlight, flying down through the air straight toward his spear.

Without wasting a single moment in incredulity, Fratley shoved aside his lance with desperate strength. In the same instant, Freya was upon him, the ground shuddering under the impact of her landing. There was the unmistakable tearing sound of fabric being rent asunder, but as the impact shocks trembling down the handle of his lance were far too gentle to imply stabbing through flesh, Fratley allowed himself a sigh of relief. He'd thrown out a challenge to battle, certainly, but never had his intent been to kill or maim. His relief was short-lived, as the emotion often is during a fight, for the next thing he noticed was the cold razor edge of Freya's lance against his neck.

Both combatants were quiet and still, two living statues breathing heavily and eyeing each other warily. The man on the ground was still due to surprise at his opponent's suicidal attack, and the fact that there was a knife-edge at his throat. And the woman standing over him, now that she had her challenger on the ground and at her mercy, was simply waiting for him to dictate the next move. She had only two options at the moment; kill him or back off, and she unwilling to do either.

Fratley's eyes narrowed, and he stared at her for a long moment, both of them still frozen in place as if they'd been turned to stone. The point of Freya's spear hovered steadily over her opponent's jugular, and Fratley's own lance hung in the two ragged gashes it had made through the side of her cloak, but the battle tension was gone, and their bodies were loose, if not completely relaxed. Even the sandstorm abated somewhat, as if sensing that the fight was over. Finally, Fratley spoke.

"If I had not moved my lance, your heart would be hanging from the end of it right now," he said quite plainly.

"I know it."

“And so how is it that you attack me with such impunity?” Fratley asked with some anger, chastizing her for her matter-of-fact tone. “Do you ever and always treat your life with such carelessness?”

“No, never,” Freya contradicted. “You have forgotten me, but not yourself. I knew you would not hurt me knowingly.”

He frowned anew at her phrasing, and then asked, “And unknowingly?”

The woman standing over him seemed to flinch slightly, but she did not move, and the lance remained at his pulse point. “Do you yield?” she demanded, her stance suddenly aggressive once more.

“I yield,” he replied. She jumped back from him then, taking one lance in each hand and thus tearing his weapon away from him. Several feet away now, Freya planted her spear in the sand, and then threaded Fratley’s lance the rest of the way through her ruined cloak as if it were a massive darning needle.

The defeated Dragoon stood up and brushed himself off, keeping his eyes on his opponent all the

while. Through the rips in her scarlet cloak, he could see an even darker red trickling down her side. He hadn't moved fast enough, apparently. But if she did not acknowledge or make apparent the injury, he could not properly offer her aid. Instead, he decided to indulge his curiosity. Perhaps in closer proximity, he would be able to spot her wound and thus offer her a curative spell or two, and in any case, all Dragoons knew full well how to take care of themselves.

He walked over to her and restated his earlier question. "And unknowingly, Lady? Do you say that I would hurt you thus?"

The cold, formal tone was gone from his voice, despite the impersonal address, and yet Freya answered him with less feeling than she had all day. Now that she was neither caught up by a whirlwind of emotions or burning with the heat of battle, she felt spent and defeated, as if it were she who had yielded to her opponent's spear instead of the other way around. "That is none of your concern, Sir Knight. And it probably never was," she ended quietly, holding both of their spears in her hands, and looking down at them with a subdued air.

“I would not burden you before with my personal concerns, and I will not do so now. Take your spear, Sir Knight. Duty beckons you, as you have said, and you shall not go unarmed,” she murmured, handing him the weapon that had nearly killed her moments before.

Whether it was pity for her apparent sorrow finally striking him, or that her mercurial behaviour had somehow moved him, Freya was surprised to hear Fratley’s next words delivered in a personable, informal tone. His voice sounded almost… friendly. It was such a contrast to his usual cool formality that she looked up immediately, her heart yearning anew for her lost love, despite her resolutions to move on.

While not quite smiling, the Dragoon’s expression was gentle, and he asked in a most normal of voices, “And will you now call me Sir and be so chillingly polite, you who seemed so fierce over my remembrances, now at the moment when you have me at your mercy?”

“How so?” she asked, leaving off any titles, personal or impersonal.

He tilted his spear so that its metal tip sang against the one she still held loosely in one hand.

“You have one demand of me, Lady. Ask what you wish.”

She searched his eyes for such a long time that he wondered if she were attempting to communicate telepathically with him, as the priests sometimes claimed to be able to do, and then surprised him by suddenly sinking to one knee before him, in a submissive attitude completely unlike his other experiences of her. Startled, he knelt in the sand before her to peer into her face, but she noticed him not, for she had her head bowed, and her eyes closed.

In a clear, sweet voice, without a trace of the anger and bitterness she’d evidenced before, she said, “When you left Burmecia, I fell to my knees only when you’d turned your back, that you might not see my weakness. And I kept silent my cries, that you might leave unburdened by my selfishness. Now you will see me, not as a brave fellow Knight, ready to lay down their life for yours and nothing more than that, but as only myself, afraid to lay my heart open before you. I had your regard, your admiration, and I dare hope your friendship, but I found it all unsatisfactory, for…”

She opened her eyes and raised her head, and blinked in surprise to see him hunkered down in the sand so close to her. Drawing in a deep breath, she tilted her head in a pleading gesture, and whispered with a faint smile, sweet and sad because there was no hope nor demand in it… only a plea, “I love thee… and it breaks my heart that you have forgotten me. I could not then nor ever prevent you from obeying the call of duty, but take me with you, for I can not bear to see the back of you again.”

Fratley’s expression did not change, but his eyes widened slightly, and he seemed to see her anew. Not just some shade of his forgotten past pleading for impossible recognition, or a fellow Knight with some small grievance to be aired, but truly… as Freya.

She waited silently, willing now to be left behind or taken along as he wished. Having been given a chance to pour out her stifled feelings and to make him acknowledge her… to make him see her… she now found that the wounds that had ached within her heart for so long no longer festered with bitterness and regret. What was, was. She had been forgotten, but so long as Sir Fratley’s mind remained untouched from now on, he would not forget her again. It was enough.

He rose from the sand, and she stood as well, still waiting for his decision with an unusual serenity, within and without.

“You do yourself an injustice,” Fratley said, upon finally breaking the silence. He spoke firmly, as if lecturing her, and a pair of slender brows raised themselves over Freya’s blue eyes at this curious form of replying to her impassioned confession. Seemingly unaware of Freya’s wondering gaze, the Knight continued, “Your heart is strong, one of loyalty and faith and courage, and it would not break over so fleeting a thing as my seeming affection or indifference. And as for the depth of tragedies that you could or could not bear, Lady… it is not meet that you would compare my departure to the destruction of our fair kingdom, the cessation of the Cleyran windstorm, the theft of our Wind Harp’s jewel, and the many dangers facing our King and Heir, and find that the former was unbearable compared to the others, which you overcame when others in the Dragoon Guards had failed.”

He paused, and then spoke more gently. “Be that as it may… it is not needful that you should suffer at all, could I prevent it. Accompany me on my journey then, and be content. You have already my regard, as one of the king’s Dragoons. You have

gained much of my admiration this afternoon as well, for there are few who could best me, with one of my own lances, no less. And you shall have my friendship as well, Lady Freya, for I find you well worthy of it."

Freya's heart quickened at finally hearing her name fall from his lips, and barely heard him add, "As for the other,

*I love thee*

we shall see."

After all of her bizzare demonstrations this afternoon, Fratley had little idea of what to expect of this strange Dragoon. He wondered briefly if she would fall to her knees once more, or perhaps accept his words with a cool and proper little speech of her own, or even just bow and walk away. She surprised him once more, however, by nodding her head as if satisfied and asking in an entirely normal tone of voice, "When will we depart?"

He blinked in surprise, and then looked around them at the ruddy sky. "It will be sundown soon. We will take the night to ready ourselves for the journey, and leave at stardawn."

“So early?” queried Freya. “Even the priests will still be asleep.”

“None need watch us out of the gates when there are two to guard each other,” replied Fratley, “and we shall pray for each other on the journey, shall we not? No one else is needed.” Freya nodded in agreement, secretly pleased that to the best of her knowledge, she was still yet the only one to be given this honor and priviledge to watch and pray over his journeys.

The conversation was apparently at an end, for Fratley then nodded to her and began walking back toward the stairs, his lance held loosely in one hand. Freya stayed behind for a moment, alone and unlonely in the sandy clearing, gazing at the setting sun, breathing deep of the dry, dusty air, and feeling as if she could jump over Cleyra itself. Not out of any profound joy and sense of fulfillment, for she’d simply received permission to accompany Sir Fratley on a journey, but of a sensation of possibility and renewed hope. Then, not wanting to seem as if she were sand-gathering, she started up the stairs as well.

After the first turn in the convoluted staircase, she found Sir Fratley waiting for her. As he saw her

stop a few steps below him, he asked without preamble, “What did I say to you then, when I asked you to watch me out of the gates so long ago?”

Freya replied promptly, having treasured the words for so many years that they were always ready at her lips, despite the fact that she’d never spoken them aloud before.

“You said, ‘I would have you watch me out of the gates when I leave tomorrow, Freya,’” she recited, “‘for of all the prayers I would have for my success, I know that yours will be the most faithful in consistency, and earnest in tone. And should time provide you with leisure, watch for my return as well, that your loyalty and faith would be my welcome home.’”

“Did I call you by your name, then?” Fratley asked in mild surprise. The Dragoons, accustomed to formality, used titles alone or along with a name, and the casual practice of addressing someone simply by their name was usually restricted to family or some other such intimate relationship.

“It was a habit of several years at that time,” Freya explained, “that you would leave off the ‘Lady’ and call me by my name now and again, as you had in the last handful of months during which

you taught me the arts of a Knight. You were very generous in that you left off the ‘stubborn’ or ‘impossible’ that you used to precede it with while I was a Novice,” she added with an impish smile.

Fratley nodded by way of reply, and began up the stairs again. Freya caught sight of his face as he turned one corner, and wondered to herself at his absorbed expression, as if she’d given him some weighty problem to ponder over, rather than a brief recital of times past. As she turned the same corner, she came upon him waiting once more.

“You said that I had not forgotten myself,” he said, speaking as if simply continuing a previous conversation. “Have I truly not changed, despite the loss of my memory?”

Freya shook her head decidedly. “No, Sir Fratley, you have not. There are some small differences in your manner, but they are assuredly the result of your memory loss. The character behind the thoughts and actions are the same as they were when you walked out of Burmecia’s gates.”

“And you, Lady Freya?” he asked. “Have you changed since that day at all?”

“I doubt that I have, for all the time that has passed,” Freya admitted, wondering if this answer would please or disappoint. After all, she had just confessed to a lack of any significant maturing or excelling, had she not? But she felt that listing all of the new spells, knowledge, skills, and experiences she had gained while traveling would seem boastful and shallow.

Again, Fratley simply nodded at her response, and continued walking up the stairs. They traversed a small bridge, and then he disappeared up another spiraling staircase. For a third time, Freya found him standing still on the stairs above her when she’d come into his sight once more.

“Freya!” he said loudly all of a sudden, and she nearly saluted him in reaction to the commanding tone, and right after that, nearly fell back down the stairs in startlement as she realized that he’d called her by name alone, as she had not heard him do for years.

“Yes, Sir Fratley?” she replied quickly, wondering to herself if he intended to interrogate her thus at each corner of each stairway. It was a long route back to the treetops, and they might not make it in time to pack before stardawn. ’Twould be worth

it, she thought to herself, if he continued to call me by name as he used to.

However, they made no more stops after this one last, brief conversation.

“You should have asked me.”

Freya stared. Sir Fratley stared back at her, a slight frown on his face as if he were finally upset at her now for her reticience of years ago.

“I would not have stayed,” he added, “and you know that as well as I, being that you seem to know me as well as I have come to be reacquainted with myself since returning to Burmecia. But if I am the same as I was, and yet I spoke to you thus, then you should have asked.” Freya continued to stare up at him at this speech, delivered in a terse, tight voice. She could only dream that it might be regret that forced this strange emotional quality into his voice… and what else could it be?

“You should not have waited until I was gone to fall to your knees and weep,” Fratley declared. “You should have asked, Freya, and I would have knelt in turn to beg you to come with me!”

The Dragoon finished off his rather heated speech and then stood over his companion, practically

glaring at her, and when she did not reply, but simply stood there looking up at him with incredulous, pleading blue eyes, the anger seemed to melt out of him, and he sighed once.

“You are so strange to me,” he said softly, and nearly toppled Freya over by brushing his fingers against her cheek. “This morning, I admit, you were barely in my thoughts at all. Now… I wish that of all the people here, I could remember you.”

They stood on the stairs for a while longer, simply watching each other. Fratley peered down at her with bemused interest, as if seeking some inner enlightenment on this unique, enigmatic woman who had, in one afternoon, wasted time with him in idle conversation, laid him flat on his back and put a spear to his throat, and then told him that she loved him. He had found her irritating, emotional, fiery, brave, loyal, innocent, and finally, something that he couldn’t quite understand… comforting. In this demanding Dragoon, he seemed to have found someone who could serve as an anchor of sorts, in the stead of his missing past. Hours before, he had wondered why she persisted in pursuing him. Now, he wondered the same thing, but with gratitude and amazement at her faithfulness in the face of his chilling indifference.

And Freya simply looked up at him, smiling at his words. What else could she do? She wanted to fall down and weep as he'd told her she should have done so long ago. She wanted to run out of the gates and rid the entire continent of all its monsters in order to expend a small portion of the exultant energy she felt welling up within her. She wanted to dance. But those things would involve taking her eyes off of him, and she preferred not to at the moment.

They stood there for a few moments more, and then Sir Fratley nodded once and began up the stairs again, this time not stopping until they'd reached Cleyra's streets. They met gazes, bowed to each other, and then parted ways, Freya to the weapons smith, and Fratley back towards his home. On the way, he paused and looked about him. Finding himself quite alone, he opened the vest of his old, much-mended traveling attire to peer at the inner lining. Pinned there was a small, dented Novice's medal, with a wobbly "F" scratched into the back of it. He'd found this medal attached to his vest directly over his heart, when he'd awoken one day and found that he had no idea who he was, and searched his own person for clues. Fratley had until now assumed

that this medal had been his… a small memento of his own novitiate, but now he thought otherwise.

A prodigal Novice whom he had trained for four years, served with for some years more as a Dragoon… whom he had called by her given name on occassion, and whose Novice medal he'd kept pinned into his clothes…

Sir Fratley fastened his vest, and then looked back along the path toward the direction Freya had dissapeared to, one hand still holding his lance, the other resting thoughtfully over his heart.

As if to himself, he murmured, "I believe I loved thee as well… and probably will again."

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